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In Northern Italy, a Crossroads of Culinary Arts



Nigel Dickinson for The New York Times

Osteria di Vico Palla, in one of the oldest parts of Genoa, offers an unusually large menu and some very good desserts.
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By **MARK BITTMAN**
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IN most of [Italy](#)'s villages and towns, restaurants serve the same dishes they've been serving for a hundred years or more. These vary from one town to the next, even if the distances traveled are tiny, and the locals usually insist that the food in the last town you visited is inferior to what you're about to taste. About half the time they're right.

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Culinary Crossroads in Genoa

In the cities, though, you find more regional food, and even — gasp — food from other parts of Italy, giving you a taste of more varied cuisines. Genoa, in the heart of Liguria, is one of the best cities for this sort of pan-Italian eating, at least in part because the region is among [Europe](#)'s culinary highlights; it remains difficult to eat any way but well here.

Though Genoa is not the largest city in Northern Italy (both [Milan](#) and [Turin](#) are bigger), it is the country's most important port and features, in the città vecchia (old city), what is among the most sprawling, best preserved and most active medieval quarters in Europe. Here you find the typically narrow lanes

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Map: Genoa

that can barely accommodate anything wider than a scooter; at least three world-class churches; and, at the border with the “new” city, a street of spectacular palazzi. These days, the area includes dozens (I’m tempted to write “countless,” but indeed the list is finite) of restaurants that leave me walking around muttering, “If there were only one of these in my neighborhood, I’d be happy.”

Genoa also has a population that cares deeply about food, in a way that is ordinarily reserved for towns and villages. The artichokes from nearby Albenga are practically worshiped; anchovies are considered daily fare (you may eat more of them in a day here than you do in a year at home); pine nuts, olives, local seafood and herbs (especially basil, of course) are all ubiquitous, and the continuing dedication to the old ways is evident on nearly every street, in the bakeries that make farinata (the chickpea flatbread akin to Nice’s socca), vegetable tortas and focaccia, in the vegetable markets the size of closets and in the shop that sells tripe and nothing but.

It’s in the old city where I find the places I’ve come to adore, not because the food is so great (it’s so good just about everywhere in Liguria that this would be splitting hairs) but because the choices are a little unusual or — as is the case with Trattoria Maria — the atmosphere is irresistible.

Trattoria Maria

I’ll start with Maria, because it’s one of my favorite restaurants in the world. I must, however, issue a caution: this is really a workingman’s lunch place, a dive, a cheap eats joint. (A middle-aged provincial Ligurian friend told me Maria “saved his life” by taking care of his nutritional needs through his college career in Genoa.) If you are in the neighborhood — by which I mean anywhere in Genoa — and you’re not too prissy, this is a fabulous option. If you want anything approaching elegance or refinement, go elsewhere. Your concierge will tell you to steer clear, your Italian friends might even scoff, but — well, I think you’ll love the experience.

The place may sound like a potential movie location: There are bright green semigloss walls, painted halfway up, then white plaster, like a 1950’s school cafeteria. It’s lunch only. The communal tables, at which single workmen sit and eat, are covered with red-and-white-checked cotton tablecloths (could this be where it all began?). If you make a reservation (which isn’t necessary), your name will be written on a paper napkin on your table.

The handwritten menu changes daily, and dishes run out: I couldn’t get fried anchovies on this visit because I went too late in the day (too bad, because I remembered loving them a couple of years ago). You order, and when the dumbwaiter goes down, your server yells your order down the shaft. With the exception of pasta and grilled foods, service is nearly instantaneous.

You might have coarse-grained, perfectly creamy polenta with dark, fresh, intensely flavored mushroom ragù — or meat ravioli stuffed with a flavorful pork mixture, with the same sauce; polpettone, an unusual, traditional and satisfying vegetarian meatball of green beans, herbs, eggs and cheese; torta Pasqualine, a delicious and equally unusual pie of artichokes, marjoram and cheese, with an egg broken over the top to make a thin crust; artichokes stuffed with bread crumbs and anchovies; fried zucchini; or fennel and onion Parmesan. I also love the cima di

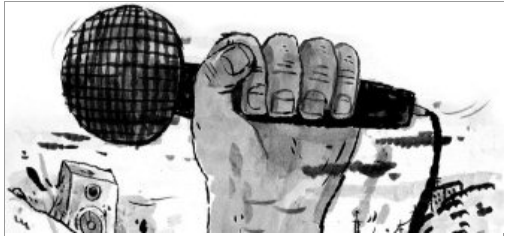


Nigel Dickinson for The New York Times
FROM TOP Octopus at Trattoria Maria; fritto misto at Pintori; steak with Parmesan cheese at Berlocca; and seafood pasta at Osteria di Vico Palla.
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vitello (veal breast), trenette with pesto, and the olive-oil-cooked French fries.

Trattoria Maria, Vico Testadoro 14r, (39-010) 581 080. Lunch for two, with wine, about 23 euros (roughly \$30 at \$1.30 to the euro). Closed Sundays.

Pintori

If you're looking for something a little less informal, I'd send you to Pintori, a lovely family-run place that serves Sardinian food. (There's a large Sardinian population in Genoa, so it isn't as surprising as you might think.) This is a long, narrow room with vaulted ceilings, surrounded by the thick walls of a former palazzo. It's pretty in a warm and quiet way, with a wonderful wine list that offers some rarely seen Sardinian beauties.

Many of the dishes have those same features: unusual and gorgeous. Even the bread, which is called carta musica when fresh (it's said to be so thin you can read music through it) and pane carasau when dried into cracker form, is addictive. The food is sensational: bianchetti — tiny fish, of the kind fried whole everywhere in the Mediterranean — simply boiled and served with a thin, hummuslike sauce, are rich and satisfying; polpo alla catalana is dark and deep, with a peppery sweet-and-sour sauce.

Some of the pasta dishes are incredibly good, and if you're not super-hungry I'd say order some antipasti and a pasta. Do not miss the simple (and perfectly cooked) spaghetti with bottarga. Bottarga is a poor man's caviar (arguably better, actually), a cake of salted, dried and pressed fish eggs, most often taken from tuna. The pasta is served only with grated bottarga and peppery olive oil, and it is nothing short of amazing. (If you were charged \$40 for it in New York you'd be happy, and here it's around 12 euros.) The catta de abba — a fresh, very soft pasta — is topped only with ricotta and pecorino, for an unusual experience in delicious blandness.

For a main course I'd recommend stracotta (long-cooked) beef, done in wine (cannonau, a Barolo-like red from Sardinia) and prunes; it's very deep and flavorful. Order, too, if they're in season, the artichokes cooked in milk. In truth, I had nothing even marginally disappointing here.

Pintori, Via San Bernardo , 68r (39-010) 275 7507. Lunch or dinner for two, without wine, 52 euros. Closed Mondays.

Berlocca

Berlocca, a short walk away, is not as consistent but is more typically Genoese — and it's well worth a visit. Here the bianchetti are sautéed into a little pancake, served with oil and lemon in a traditional and lovely presentation no fish lover should skip. Other dishes you might not see outside of Liguria are piccagge matte (fettucine, but made with chestnut flour, a sign of historical poverty), topped with pesto; gnocchetti, which are gnocchi made with fish and flour (closely related to both quenelles and gefilte fish), served with tomatoes; the locally omnipresent fish served with potatoes, olives, pine nuts and good olive oil; and a simple cappon magro, fish and vegetables with a green sauce based on parsley, olive oil, capers, pine nuts, garlic and probably a few anchovies for good measure.

Berlocca is a converted torta farinata, the local name for an old-fashioned takeout joint with the oven in the back. The restaurant makes farinata in the winter, when it's not too hot to keep the oven on all day long, and bakes very good bread and focaccia year-round. There's also a fine assortment of local cheeses, better than any of the desserts I sampled. (In general one doesn't go to Genoa, or Liguria, or even Italy, for desserts.) It's a tiny place — just a dozen or so tables in two small rooms — with pale blue walls, a tile floor, plain wood tables and chairs and paper place mats. Service is friendly but mom-and-pop-ish, which is to say its efficiency varies with the number of people eating.

Berlocca, Via Macelli di Soziglia, 45r, (39-010) 247-4162. Lunch or dinner for two, without wine,

about 45 euros. Closed Mondays and Saturdays; dinner only on Sundays.

Osteria di Vico Palla

Down an alley in a quarter called il Molo, a natural peninsula protecting the old port from the eastern winds and one of the oldest parts of town, is Osteria di Vico Palla, another dark-but-good-looking place, with tile floors and walls, vaulted ceiling, a huge wooden serving area and an open kitchen.

The menu here is larger than that of most other places in town, and it's all authentic, a kind of Ligurian greatest hits: There is mandilli (pasta handkerchiefs) with pesto; pansotti (herb-and-cheese stuffed ravioli in nut sauce); trofie (pasta pigtails) with ink and octopus, or with fish and olives; salt cod fritters; piccagge, here with a commonly seen sauce of shrimp and artichokes; minestrone with pesto; and octopus with potatoes. It's all done well.

When you sit down, you're greeted (or at least I was) with a piece of panisse, a chickpea polenta, cooled to solidify, cut and deep-fried in olive oil. Not a bad start. Also good are fried anchovies and fritters of bianchetti. If you want something really traditional, order bagnun di acciughe, a fish soup made with anchovies. Otherwise, try fish-filled ravioli with shrimp sauce, or tagliata di tonno, a nod to international cuisine in which tuna is treated like meat (which it resembles, of course), cooked rare and served with a sauce based on balsamic vinegar. Then there is the usual and almost always great Ligurian dish of fish with artichokes and olive oil.

Perhaps because the owner spent time in [England](#) (he ran a restaurant in York), the desserts are better here than almost anywhere else in town; strawberry sorbet smacks of fruit, and the fried custard is unctuous and crisp at the same time, a nice combination made even more pleasant by the addition of lemon and orange zests. In a big city like Genoa, strange things can happen; even good desserts.

Osteria di Vico Palla: Vico Palla, 11/13/15r, (39-010) 246-6575. Lunch or dinner for two, without wine, about 45 euros. Closed Mondays.

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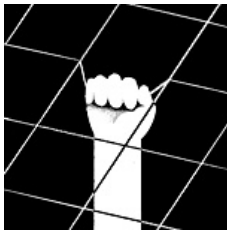


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